

# Meanwhile, in an Alternate Universe

"Where's your bathroom?"

I think this was the third time any of us had heard him speak since we met. Brightstar and Moonglow had found him on the tram from the city center, his snout buried in a claw-written notebook. We needed a second sire besides myself to equal the two dams, and he smelled of age. Moonglow was never one for subtlety. She came right out and asked if he was looking to join a childermoot. "Yes" was all he said, and "OK" was his answer to her offer to join ours.

The two of us were sitting in my den, our womb-nest incubator humming quietly in the middle of the room, occasionally beeping with a routine diagnostic message. Until he spoke he had been staring out the window at the clouds below.

"Bathroom's over there." I pointed at the curtain separating the closet-sized restroom from the den. Welkinsteader houses are small by necessity, and the bathrooms smaller still.

He entered the restroom. "What do you do for fun?" he asked from behind the curtain.

"You've seen what's all over my walls; what do you think?"

"Ah, the old guns." He paused for a moment. "What's the attraction? Why do you like collecting them, I mean. You don't look like an ear-notch."

"Well if you have good firing posture you won't blow a chunk out of your ear. But no, I'm not a gun nut, well not THAT kind of gun nut. It's the craftsmanship. I like the leatherwork on the saddles, the paw-forged iron barrels, none of this all-polymerite nonsense. It's amazing what we were able to make with our own four paws before we invented fabricators."

He washed up and rejoined me next to our womb-nest.

"What about you?" I asked. "Got any hobbies?"

He looked down at that same claw-written notebook sitting on the desk under his perch. "Oh, just this and that."

"This and that?" I probed. "You seem awfully attached to that notebook."

"Oh, that. It's nothing."

“Clearly it’s not nothing. You haven’t been without it since my friends met you on the tram.”

He let out a long sigh. “Those are my worldbuilding notes.”

“Ah!” I yipped. “So you’re a writer!”

“No no no.” He began running a rear paw through his tail and I smelled nervousness in his musk. “I’m no writer, amateur or otherwise. It’s just for fun, you know. Pups make up imaginary worlds, and I just started documenting mine as I grew up.”

“Tell me about it.”

He hesitated. “Are you SURE?”

“If I’m going to raise a litter with you I want to know what’s bouncing around between those ears of yours.”

He started wringing his tail like a towel with both rear paws, and his shyness stank up the den. “So it’s about this race of star folk called.. well we can’t pronounce their language, so we call them qMqmg. That’s an onomatopoeia of their name for themselves in one of their languages.”

“What do you mean we can’t pronounce their language?”

“Well, they have a very different vocal tract from us; no muzzle, more muscular lips that can form an airtight seal, flatter more crowded teeth, a smaller and much more nimble tongue. They use their tongue to shape the sounds coming out of their mouth to speak.” He had opened his eyes wide and his ears were pinned back. He was clearly excited to have someone to share all this with. “The tongue is so important that many of their languages use the word for tongue to mean language in the same way we use the word for throat.”

“And you went to all the trouble of designing their...‘vocal tract’?”

“Yup. And some of their languages, too”

“You make up languages?”

By now he was holding his tail in a death grip like it owed him money. “Yes. Constructed languages. Honestly the languages are the main thing. The world is just there to give them more life.” He opened his notebook to what looked like a table of different word forms in an alien script written left to right. “This language is called, well, again we can’t pronounce the name. Ultimately the name comes from this tribe who lived on this island in the northern hemisphere.” He turned to a page showing an impressive world map and pointed to a large island to the northwest of a massive continent. “So this tribe invades this island after this other empire fell.” He pointed to a peninsula on the southern edge of the continent. Anyway, this tribe becomes an empire in their own right after a few centuries.”

“Centuries? Seems awfully fast.”

“Oh, yeah, they only live a tenth of our lifespan. Makes things move a bit quicker, gives me an excuse to play around with more languages.” at this point he had started wiggling on his perch.

“Anyway, the tribe becomes an empire and they spread their language as they expand. They found some colonies on this other continent.” He pointed to another landmass across an ocean to the west of the first. “And these colonies rebel and found their own country which eventually spreads all the way to the west coast. The tribe become empire is still expanding despite the loss of some territory to these rebels, but after two massive worldwide wars this empire also falls and the rebels turned country become an empire in their own right, with their own variety of that island tribe’s language spreading across the globe in its turn.

He turned back to the table of words. “So this language is spoken by two different empires and becomes a de facto lingua franca around the world. It’s their version of Commonthroat.”

“Sounds like they haven’t terraformed any other planets.”

“No, they achieve spaceflight right before we find them.”

“And besides this ‘vocal tract’ of theirs, what do they look like?”

“Well, they have no tail, and almost no fur except on top of their head, so they wear cloth coverings like a healer. They used to have fur and live in trees just like we did, but they started living in wide open grasslands. Their rear paws lost the ability to grasp.”

“That doesn’t sound like much of an advantage, not being able to grip things with their rear paws, especially given they don’t have a tail.”

“That’s because they walk exclusively on their rear paws. Their hind legs get much longer and more muscular. It’s all so they can run long distances to catch prey. That’s also why they have no fur, it’s because they excrete saline from pores on their skin that evaporates to cool them down.”

I wrinkled my muzzle. “Eww, sounds gross.”

“Oh that’s what the missionaries that find them think at first. It smells really pungent. But eventually they grow to like the odor. They say it smells like a friend.”

“And the wildest thing is they can’t write.”

“What do you mean? You showed me that alien alphabet earlier.”

“Well they can’t write naturally like we can. They don’t evolve it, they have to invent it. So they just speak for tens of thousands of years before finally inventing writing.”

“And how do they preserve information then if they can’t write?”

“Orally at first, passing it down from sires and dams to their pups.”

“Doesn’t sound very reliable.”

“Oh it’s not at all. They spread across the globe long long before inventing writing, and don’t even remember one another until they meet again thousands of years later. At that point the different groups have developed vastly different cultures and languages.”

“More languages to invent?”

“Exactly!” he yipped.

He suddenly smelled embarrassed. “You probably think I’m crazy now.”

“Crazy? No. Maybe just a bit eccentric. But you clearly have a vivid imagination. I’m sure our pups will love hearing your stories.”

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